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Creating a Child-Friendly Neighborhood: Iranian Schoolchildren Talk about Desirable and Undesirable Elements in Their Neighborhoods

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Abstract

Iranian children live in city neighborhoods often rated poorly in terms of child-friendly indicators. Children's voices expressing priorities, needs, and desires for improving their neighborhoods are given little attention by urban planners. This research investigated schoolchildren's views of favorable and unfavorable attributes of their neighborhood environments. The top three desirable neighborhood features children identified were: participation, access to green areas and the natural environment; and quality of built environments and public urban spaces. These results can broaden planners' perspectives for creating child-friendly local environments. Considering children's ideas like this would help to mainstream better urban policies in Iran.

Keywords: child-friendly neighborhood, children's views, children's participation, Iranian cities, urban planning

Introduction

Population forecasts show that by 2025, 60% of children globally will inhabit urban areas (Krishnamurthy, 2019). Yet, young citizens have little presence in the decision-making scene. With no role in political or economic development, such as voting or paying taxes, children are commonly overlooked in urban policymaking (Brown et al., 2019). Adults ignore their capacity to participate and influence urban planning and implementation processes (Affandi et al., 2019). Without participatory perspectives, older-generation assumptions have led to the formation of urban spaces which are not child-responsive, especially at the neighborhood level.

Nonetheless, even within prevailing top-down urban planning, some decision-makers have adopted more participatory approaches that recognize children's expertise about their own needs in their lived environment. Instead of *studying children* in the city, it is preferable to understand the urban environment *with children* (Burke, 2005; McAllister, 2011).

Through UNICEF's Child-Friendly City (CFC) framework, which operationalizes the 1989 United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), a movement emerged that focused serious attention on the extent to which urban environments supported children's growth and development. Research in North and South America, Africa, Australasia, Asia and Europe show that most features of CFCs have relevance across all countries. These include children's rights to access basic health and education services, facilitating areas for play (Kingston et al., 2007), and more recently also include attention to clean energy, smart data and ICT networks (UNICEF, 2018). However, implementation of the CFC framework and its features is still influenced by countries' political contexts (Nan, 2020), and cultural norms governing gender, sexuality, and ability.

Interestingly, the religious characteristics of nations or children's relationship with religion are rarely mentioned in the CFC context. This poses additional tensions for scholars and practitioners wanting to support children's participation in planning processes in theocratic nations. In Iran, many traditional cultural and religious rules regulate children's lives—clothing, speaking, mixing, places they are allowed, boys/girls schooling—and children's needs for play, leisure and learning are subordinated to top-down decisions by adults with little awareness of what interests children or what children value in their environment. Children's ideas are not generally considered of value in planning or designing urban locations, nor are children deemed to have the competence to be involved. Children's participation is often considered inherently subversive of existing formal systems even in wealthy democratic countries. Furthermore, children's views may conflict with existing social and cultural norms. Neighborhoods have different spatial, social, and cultural characteristics (Joye et al., 2016), and children use their living environments differently than adults (Monaghan, 2019). It is thus important for local professionals to refine generic models of CFC and children's engagement in planning processes in their local context to create their own child-friendly features in neighborhood development.

The sophistication of children's perspectives about favorable and unfavorable attributes of their neighborhoods can assist urban planners to design more child-friendly neighborhoods. Indeed, awareness of children's priorities, needs, and desires in their neighborhoods has a significant impact on children themselves: being asked to express their ideas about city matters in childhood and exposed to democratic processes prepares them to participate as responsible and mature adult citizens (Oestreich, 2012). Understanding children's perceptions and concerns in urban settings is also significant in raising children as active citizens and enhancing their position within the adult community (Cele & Van der Burgt, 2015). Children's interaction with adults who are part of society's power structures brings valuable effects for these professionals since dialogue between children and adults involves consideration of children's views, taking into account their age and maturity (UNICEF, 2017).

Professionals are capable of jointly planning neighborhoods with children based on children's current and future needs (Rakhimova, 2011). Indeed, in wealthier countries over recent years, increasing attention has focused on working with children to design their neighborhoods to improve physical and social settings for children's benefit and well-being (Carpiano, 2009; Christensen & O'Brien, 2003; Loebach, 2013). Unfortunately, the pace of change is uneven in different areas due to the socio-cultural contexts of children's living environments. Children in many developing countries such as Iran have fewer opportunities to contribute to planning and development processes. Today Iranian children are involved in some local projects and urban research (Behnia et al., 2020; Ghalandarian & Younesi, 2020; IRNA, 2019). Examples of children's involvement in projects in Iran include: the Bam child-friendly city (UNICEF, 2005), the City of Children in Zarand (SedayeZarand News Agency, 2017), the project of "Developing a common vision in the Yousef-Abad neighborhood in Tehran" (Barakpour & Sharafi, 2017), children's expectations from the city of Tehran in the competition of "The city I like" (IRNA, 2019), fostering social inclusion of migrant children in the Yazd community, creating a framework for the implementation of meaningful child participation in the Kouhsangi Complex in the city of Mashhad, and children's participation in the process of urban planning for local parks in Tabriz (UNICEF, 2019). While children's contribution to these efforts is valuable, for their engagement to be genuine, children's insights must be incorporated into planning processes and affect urban decisions and plans' outcomes (Carroll et al., 2019; Clark & Percy-Smith, 2006).

To better understand children's viewpoints about their neighborhood in Iranian cities, we invited 10-12-year-old children to share their understanding of their local environment. The study aimed to elucidate which factors and elements of the neighborhood attract or repel a child in their neighborhood, and whether they consider their neighborhood to be child-friendly or not. The present article begins with the relevant literature around child-friendly settings and the integration of children in creating urban spaces. To better understand the concept of CFC and the situation of urban children in the study area, the next section reviews the idea of the child-friendly city in Iran. The process of inviting participants to reveal insights about their neighborhoods through semi-structured interviews and analysis of children's perspectives are then elaborated in the method and result sections. The

last parts of the article discuss the findings and draw out the main implications of the study.

Child-Friendly Urban Environments

The aim of creating a child-friendly environment is to improve children's lives, now and in the future. A child-friendly city is a sustainable city that supports the rights of children. One of the important aspects of sustainability is including a broad range of voices, including those of children, which is one of the characteristics of a CFC (UNICEF, 2005). Through children's participation in the planning and implementation of urban projects and policy at the local level, children can play a significant role in addressing the challenges of sustainability (Malone, 2016). CFCs are child-oriented in substance, not just in rhetoric, with child-responsive settings that meet children's needs. Creating public spaces for play and leisure and parks emphasizes children's right to participate in public space and discourse (Affandi et al., 2019; Pitsikali et al., 2020; Whitzman et al., 2010). Within a spatial and social planning context, the UNCRC enshrines the rights of every young citizen to: have effective governance (Articles 3, 4, 6); express their ideas (Articles 12-14); participate socially with their peers and engage with their communities (Article 15); have access to nature and a healthy, unpolluted environment (Article 24); enjoy freedom of movement (Article 12); have access to information (Article 17); and be protected from exploitation (Articles 19, 32-36) and discrimination (Article 2, 8, 23) (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2004). As Malone (2001, p. 11) argues, "a child-friendly city is a people-friendly city" since all citizens benefit from urban interventions that improve children's lives. Cities commit to recognizing and upholding children's human rights (Riggio, 2002) by implementing the UNCRC because this transforms mechanisms of urban governance, the physical fabric of cities, and the very structure of societies.

Since cities have extensive control over political and economic resources, they play an important role in children's lives. Unfortunately, many children live in areas with poor housing, transportation and other physical infrastructure; inadequate waste and sanitation services; limited access to health and education services; and polluted environments. The child-friendly city movement emerged in response to these issues, compounded by globalization and rapid urbanization as rural immigrants flowed into towns and cities. One of the main principles of the CFC framework is children's participation (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2004) which guides adults and decision-makers to encourage children's participation in decision-making processes and listen to their ideas to ensure that they are reflected in decisions affecting children's lives (Davey et al., 2010; Lansdown, 2001; Carroll et al., 2019). Specifically, Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children have the right to "express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account in any matter or procedure affecting the child" (United Nations, 1989).

In addition, the CFC framework identifies eight other building blocks (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p. 9):

> *A child-friendly legal framework; a city-wide Children's Rights Strategy; a Children's Rights Unit or coordinating mechanism; a child impact assessment*

> *and evaluation; a children's budget; a regular State of the City's Children Report; dissemination of children's rights and independent advocacy for children.*

For each building block, researchers and planners have roles in providing advocacy for children and contributing to strategies, impact assessment, budgeting and reporting. To do so effectively they need to consult with children about their lives. Children are capable of understanding their surrounding environments and they are familiar with the influence of their local environment on their own lives, so it is highly desirable they should participate in community development processes (Driskell, 2002). When children are asked about what makes a good city, they are knowledgeable and expressive (Woolley et al., 1999; Morrow, 1998; Driskell, 2002; Alderson, 2000).

Within the local setting, one of the goals of child-friendly environments is that children of different ages are able to explore, experience, play and socialize with peers in their neighborhoods, with or without the presence of parents or caregivers (Gill, 2019; Hashim et al., 2019). The environmental quality of the neighborhood affects children's identity and sense of belonging and their physical and mental development (Monaghan, 2019). The neighborhood is the gateway to the larger city context; thus, before facing the complexities of the city, children gain experience in the local environment, learn to understand and accept differences, and learn to be patient and responsible citizens (Freeman & Tranter, 2011; Hashim et al., 2019).

Child-friendly neighborhoods can promote children's mental health and well-being and allow them to feel safe in independent and unrestricted movement. The main characteristics and elements of a child-friendly neighborhood are similar to those of a child-friendly city, including child participation and access to green, play and safe spaces (Zerlina & Sulaiman, 2020). The results of some studies have identified other characteristics and elements as enhancing the child-friendliness of neighborhoods. Zerlina and Sulaiman (2020) include playgrounds, access to public parks, green areas, safety, independent mobility, cycle routes, pedestrian connectivity, housing, and children's participation as features that make a neighborhood child friendly. Martin and Wood (2014) divide the characteristics of a child-friendly neighborhood into two realms: the physical realm and the psychosocial realm. The physical realm includes characteristics such as walkability, aesthetics, nature and green spaces, "places to go," and being able to "do things" within the local neighborhood. Such a neighborhood environment is a place not only for smaller children but for adolescents as well. In the realm of psychosocial safety of the neighborhood, Martin and Wood (2014) include feeling valued and not excluded, as well as a sense of community.

Remarkably, children's views show consistent themes over time and across countries. Research about children's independent mobility is one example seen in the following series of studies: Poland, Mexico and Argentina in the 1970s (Lynch, 1977), Australia in the 1990s (Malone, 1999), and Denmark (Christensen & Mikkelsen, 2013), New Zealand (Witten et al., 2017) Turkey (Çubukçu et al., 2018), Malaysia (Yatiman et al., 2012) and South Africa (Benwell, 2009) in the

2000s. Findings across this research show children value nature and visiting friends, but concerns about traffic cause them to restrict their movements if they feel the environment is not safe. A positive common aspect of studies about children's rights and creating child-friendly cities has been researchers' respect for children's views about their environments, and the desire to help children influence policy and planning decisions.

Children's Participation in Child-Friendly Cities

One of the main principles of the CFC framework is children's participation (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2004), which guides adults and decision-makers to encourage children's involvement in decision-making processes and to listen to children's ideas to ensure that they are reflected in decisions affecting their lives (Davey et al., 2010; Lansdown, 2001; Carroll et al., 2019). Specifically, Article 12 of the UNCRC states that children have the right to "express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account in any matter or procedure affecting the child" (United Nations, 1989). In addition, the CFC framework identifies eight other building blocks to ensure child-friendliness in urban environments (Children & Family Justice Center et al., 2009, p. 9):

> *A child-friendly legal framework; a city-wide Children's Rights Strategy; a Children's Rights Unit or coordinating mechanism; a child impact assessment and evaluation; a children's budget; a regular State of the City's Children Report; dissemination of children's rights; and independent advocacy for children.*

For each building block, researchers and planners have roles in providing advocacy for children and contributing to strategies, impact assessment, budgeting and reporting. To do so effectively, these professionals need to consult with children about their lives. Children are capable of understanding their surrounding environments and the influence of their local environment on their own lives, so it is highly desirable that they should participate in community development processes (Driskell, 2002). An extensive body of research has demonstrated that when children are asked about what makes a good city, they are knowledgeable and expressive (Woolley et al., 1999; Morrow, 1998; Driskell, 2002; Alderson, 2000). The present research builds on this work by adding Iranian children's views about their neighborhoods.

Child-Friendly Urban Settings in Iran

The concept of designing a child-friendly environment does not have a long record in Iran (Kalantari et al., 2013; Kiani & Esmailzadeh Kavaki, 2012). The number of discussions about children's transport is increasing (Ahmadi & Taniguchi, 2007; Davoudi et al., 2018; Shokoohi et al., 2011), and the same is true of articles about children's urban context in Iranian journals (Marouf et al., 2015; Ramezani & Said, 2013; Shahrizadeh & Moayedfar, 2017b). There is still, however, a paucity of data about children's views that constrains the ability to influence decision-makers.

The absence of policies and processes that include children in planning their neighborhoods is also influenced by Iranian history. In 1979, the Islamic and

republican revolution in Iran transformed the political system from a kingdom to a theocratic Islamic republic. Iran underwent massive social changes that have influenced family size and urbanization. Along with progressive effects reducing birthrate, greater restrictions were placed on people's mobility, especially that of girls and women, and religious study increased in schools. In the post-revolutionary period, the country experienced war with neighboring Iraq for nearly a decade. Although Iran ratified the UNCRC, Iranian children face many problems including poverty, child labor, and homelessness, along with distinctly urban issues of access to the outdoor environment, traffic, and places for children to play. These problems point to the planning and policy gap in addressing the well-being of children in Iranian cities (Marouf et al., 2015).

Various factors have contributed to restricting Iranian children's active presence in the urban public spaces of their neighborhoods. Modernization has led to changes in the structure of Iranian cities that have significantly restricted children's movements in and between high-rise apartments and home spaces. Cities formed around arterial roadways to make traffic flow easier, however in most cases this form denies the physical and psychological needs of children, compromises their safety, and frustrates their experience of open space in city neighborhoods (Mansouri & Ghare Bigloo, 2012). These problems have increased parents' concerns and consequently reduced the presence of children in urban environments and isolated them in private spaces. In a study of the relationship between neighborhood physical environments and the leisure activities of 10- to 12-year-old children in Tehran, Hedayati (2018) indicated that children's activities were more inside the home than outside. In poorer socio-economic areas some children can still be found playing in neighborhood public spaces.

Another reason for children's absence in public spaces is lack of access to the appropriate urban services required to address their needs. A study in Yazd City about per capita funding in urban development plans found that allocations were insufficient to meet the needs of children under 18 years. This resulted, for example, in a lack of play equipment (Shahrizadeh & Moayedfar, 2017a). Research in Ardabil City examined primary school children's ideas about their ideal city and also found that city facilities were not adequate for children; except for a few playgrounds and parks, no other spaces were dedicated to children. Here, too, this lack of urban play spaces limited children's activities mainly to home and school (Imani et al., 2017). Overall, the contemporary urban form in Iran has minimized urban spaces and does not properly facilitate children's presence and activity.

Methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 children aged 10-12 years to identify how they feel and think about where they live. "Qualitative research experts argue there is no straightforward answer to sample size" (Vasileiou et al., 2018, p. 2), but the imperative is to provide new data and identify common patterns. This cohort of children provided a range of opinions but was not too large to analyze for the practical purpose of identifying themes relevant to the investigation. Environmental research has shown that school-age children are the most engaged users of outdoor landscapes, especially around home and local

surroundings (Chatterjee, 2006). At the age of 10-12-years children are able to express their understanding of their environment.

We conducted this research in the city of Mashhad, located in northeastern Iran. Mashhad is Iran's second-largest city by population, area, and number of construction projects (Akhavan Tabassi & Abu Bakar, 2009). In the context of Iranian single-gendered schools, we selected equal numbers of children from a girls' school and from a boys' school to participate. Both selected schools are located in middle-income neighborhoods in Mashhad, thus eliciting the experiences of children who form the socio-economic majority in Iran, rather than wealthy or extremely poor children.

The lead author conducted the interviews with children individually. Two aspects of the interview method in this study are notable. First, semi-structured interview techniques are supported by feminist scholars for studying women and other marginalized groups, including children (Chatterjee, 2006). Since these groups often have no opportunity to tell their stories, methods such as face-to-face interviews allow them to do so. Second, interviews took the form of informal conversations, so children could be more relaxed when participating in what was for them a new type of interaction. Complicated words were avoided, as well as overly simple words and notions, as both can restrict children to trivial answers (Alderson, 2000; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). Children were asked which aspects of urban spaces they liked and did not like in their neighborhoods, and whether they considered their neighborhoods child-friendly spaces or not. Further questions sought more detailed information. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Several children took the interview conversations to a second level, expressing curiosity about why the researcher was asking about their ideas regarding their local settings. They wanted to know who would use their data and for what purpose—these are positive examples of research participants "speaking back" to the research process/project itself (Jacobs-Huey, 2002). Sometimes during interviews children stopped and thought about the questions or the conversations, some remaining engaged, while others ended their interview. The interviewer would wait and give space for this variety of responses, following the precept that "listening to children is also about respecting their silences" (Clark, 2001, p. 335).

We applied thematic content analysis to the qualitative interview data (Gentile, 2016). In addition to the identification of themes relevant to planning, we identified emergent themes during coding and the analysis of interview transcripts in a joint deductive-inductive process via NVivo that is common in such research (Lobe et al., 2008). This research had university human research ethics approval.

Findings: Child-Friendly Neighborhood Indicators from Children's Perspectives

Children's perceptions about desirable and undesirable elements and aspects of their living environments included both physical and social characteristics, and reflected matters addressed by the UNCRC. Our analyses led to the generation of themes presented in Table 1 showing desirable characteristics children identified for

their neighborhoods. Children talked about participation in activities that affect their lives, access to nature, the quality of the urban built form and public spaces, access to recreation and play spaces, level of street and neighborhood hygiene, and socio-cultural issues such as safety and social networks. Participants also mentioned the importance of religious spaces, reflective of their political and socio-cultural context.

Table 1. Children's views of characteristics of a favorable neighborhood

Theme	Category	Sub-category
Participation	Participation of children	• Listening to children's voice • Participation of children in schools • Participation of children in neighborhoods' decisions
Green spaces and natural environment	Parks	• More neighborhood parks
	Other green elements	• Planting more trees • Planting more flowers • More lawn
	Protection of green spaces and natural environment	• Protecting plants during playing • Watering trees in the neighborhoods' parks • Not walking on the grass in the parks • More protection in neighborhood parks
Quality of built environments and public urban spaces	Public urban spaces	• More urban furniture • More open spaces • More paved streets • Squares in neighborhoods
	Buildings	• Renovating old buildings
	Shopping centers	• More and well-designed shopping centers
Recreational and play spaces	Streets as playing areas	• Biking in the streets • Playing football • Meeting friends
	Other play spaces	• More football fields • More game clubs • Public hall
	Gender specific play area	• More sports fields for girls
Hygiene	• Cleaner neighborhood • Not throwing rubbish in the streets • More trash bins • Cleaner parks • Cleaner playgrounds • Cleaner public toilets • No dusty and muddy areas	

People and friends	People	Presence of people
	Friends	Socializing with friends Playing with friends and peers
	Neighbors	Kind neighbors Positive feelings towards neighbors
Safety and security	Safety in the built environments and public urban spaces	Less dead-end streets Less old buildings Less narrow streets
	Safety in green spaces	Safe parks with no offenders
	Safety elements	Guard in the neighborhoods Guard in the parks More police officers
Access and proximity	Access to school Access to parks	Less distance between schools and houses Less distance between parks and houses
Religious spaces	Holy Shrine Mosques Religious schools	

Children referred to their emotions and memories from specific places and times they had spent in their neighborhoods. Urban characteristics, available activities, and constraints in their neighborhoods influenced their experiences—for instance, play equipment or its absence; bike, walking and running spaces; areas for ball play; trees and other natural components. However, children's comments were not always based on their own experiences; they sometimes relied on what they learned from others about judging urban spaces. Thus, children's responses can be seen to represent their unique personality, socialization with their families, religious and other educational training, and also their individual socio-cultural and religious backgrounds.

Participation

Children talked about their willingness to take part in decisions, including decisions made at schools and also decisions about their neighborhoods. They believed that children like themselves should be engaged in creating spaces and places in their local areas. Typical responses from children included:

> *Children must be asked about their neighborhood parks because adults do not know what happened in our hearts* (10-year old boy).

In addition to children's desire to participate in the study and share their views about their neighborhoods, the discussions often revealed that children were insightful and knowledgeable about the physical, social, leisure and ecological aspects of their neighborhoods. Importantly, some of the children could link different experiences and observations to abstract concepts; for example, one 10-year-old girl linked the night-time activity of shops with her sense of security, "I

like shops in my neighborhood because they are open until night, so my neighborhood is safe."

Green Spaces and Natural Environment

Children's ability to think at multiple levels was evident when discussing access to nature and the quality of parks. Children identified the planted areas of their neighborhoods and their local parks as desirable places to be. These were areas that gave them a sense of well-being. As one 12-year-old boy exclaimed, "I like the green area in my neighborhood because it makes me feel good." In addition to their emotional response to nature, children had pragmatic suggestions for improving the natural elements in their neighborhoods. Examples of these actions included "planting more trees and flowers," "building more parks," "more lawns," "more green spaces" and "improving the quality of parks."

Indeed, children mentioned improvements to parks and natural areas in their neighborhoods more frequently than other aspects of their urban environments, demonstrating how important the natural environment is in their lives. Children could also think strategically into the future, as illustrated by their views about the need for the protection of green spaces. For example:

> *Parks must be kept!* (10-year-old girl)
> *The nature of [our] neighborhood should be preserved* (11-year-old girl).

These girls seemed to be concerned they might lose nature in their neighborhood, so many of their comments focused on how to preserve the environment. They mentioned: "protecting plants during playing," "watering trees in the neighborhood's parks" and "not walking on the grass in the parks."

Quality of Built Environments and Public Urban Spaces

Children's appreciation of nature was not restricted to parks and vegetation. Some children talked about other spaces in their neighborhoods, such as squares, which also allow children to interact with nature. "I like the neighborhood's square because it is big, has a fountain and has green parts around it," mentioned an 11-year-old boy. Children liked those public urban spaces in their neighborhoods where they can enjoy nature, beauty and good design.

Children discussed the general quality of the built environments in the things they noted as positive or negative in their experience, as well as identifying more specific attributes of shops and streets. Their conversations revealed the plurality of their aspirations, interests and needs for the city in which they live. While some children wanted to see the city "building bigger and more buildings," others supported the "renovation of old buildings." A few children liked the design of hotels in their neighborhoods. In neighborhoods that had hotels, children expressed interest in the hotels' physical design and their function in bringing diverse groups of people and activities to their locality. Some indicated a need for "more kindergartens." Importantly, children were articulate when explaining why they liked environmental features, and the implications for their neighborhood. One 10-year-old girl stated, "[the] streets where I live are good because they are clean."

Recreational and Play Spaces

In addition to mentioning the attributes of the built environment, children also identified the functional benefits of physical spaces in their neighborhood. Iran segregates schools by gender in both primary and secondary education, as well as outdoor play. Boys have much greater freedom in neighborhood mobility and are allowed to play sports and engage in physical activities. Girls, by contrast, face cultural and religious protocols constraining their activities to a much greater extent. Many of the boys said that they liked the streets of their neighborhoods because they can play there. They also talked about the benefits of sports fields and public halls in their neighborhoods, which allowed them to socialize, play, and take part in outdoor physical activities, sports as well as more sedentary activities. Comments from a 12-year-old boy demonstrated awareness of spatial relationships due to their experiences and observations, "I do not like the parking lot in front of our neighborhood's park which is an obstacle to playing football." The following quotations illustrate themes regarding facilities and boys' enjoyment of sporting activities:

> *I like the football field in my neighborhood* (12-year-old boy).
> *The game club of the neighborhood is one of the good places* (12-year-old boy).
> *I like biking in the neighborhood* (10-year-old boy).
> *I like those parts of the neighborhood where I can play with my friends* (11-year-old boy).

Children had ideas for changing and modifying the playing areas in their neighborhoods. They expressed their wishes about "building amusement parks," obtaining "equipment for playing football, volleyball and basketball," "building playfields."

As boys have more freedom in playing outdoors, as noted above, some girls suggested "building sports fields for girls," so they could also be more active. The desire for girls to have their own sports fields suggest they want to have similar opportunities to boys, even though religious and cultural norms limit the location, time and type of activities that girls are permitted.

The remarkable thing about what both boys and girls said about modifying their neighborhoods' playing areas is the practical competence they demonstrated. On the one hand, they were able to imaginatively assess limitations in their physical environment, while on the other hand they could propose appropriate solutions that are congruent with children's activity needs and sensible planning actions that had not been enacted.

Hygiene

Features of living areas relating to hygiene and keeping neighborhoods clean were important indicators for children that spaces are child-friendly. Children discussed the need for "cleaner parks" and "cleaner playgrounds." Some of them expressed their desires for more waste facilities and services, as one 10-year-old girl said, "[m]ore trash bins in my neighborhood are required; maybe it helps make cleaner

streets." Some children recognized the behavioral elements that create dirty neighborhoods, for instance, one 12-year-old girl wanted action so that local people would "not throw away rubbish," understanding that better waste facilities would help change behavior. Other children could see the benefits of proactively maintaining the tidiness and hygienic qualities of the neighborhood in statements such as this by a 10-year-old boy who proposed, "Gathering the rubbish from neighborhoods."

People and Friends

The presence and connection between people make children feel safe and secure, a key element in creating livable spaces for them. As a 10-year-old girl shared, "The crowding of people in our neighborhoods is important for me because it makes me feel safe." Many children reported they liked their neighborhoods because they have friends and neighbors nearby. Some children also expressed positive feelings about their neighbors who are known to them: "We have kind and friendly neighbors in our neighborhood. They help us when we need them" (12-year-old girl).

Safety and Security

Ensuring that spaces in the neighborhoods promoted safety was another common idea expressed by children. Recommendations for improving safety included: "guards for protecting neighborhood," "guards for protecting parks," and "guards in the narrow streets." Children's suggestions centered on formal types of policing instead of community-based or physical design responses, so it seems that children made distinctions between a general social safety net provided by the broader community and professional protection from criminal or other serious activity.

Access and Proximity

Access to children's desired locations such as parks and schools was an important issue for children. Some children expressed the need for "building parks closer so we can walk to parks," and others explained that developers should be "building schools near houses," all of which are ideas that align with desirable planning practice. Some children considered their neighborhoods to be pleasant because they have good, easy access to places and services. A 10-year-old girl said, "The best feature of our neighborhood is its proximity to my school."

Religious Spaces

One significant item children mentioned during interviews was access to religious areas such as mosques in their neighborhoods. Faith-based sites are favorite places for some children. A boy aged 12, for instance, mentioned that "We live in a good neighborhood because we have access to the Holy Shrine." A 10-year-old boy noted, "I like a religious school (seminary) in our neighborhood." A combination of factors makes this worth noting for urban designers. Some children find visiting their local mosque pleasurable with family members and relatives. This develops their cultural sense of tradition in a secure and calm environment. In the increasingly restricted urban milieu, the promise of physical space in religious settings also offers the embedded aesthetics that are built into the location, in contrast to utilitarian home environments or less structured, unsafe or unavailable

places elsewhere in the neighborhood. Safe and easy access across roads to religious places is one example of the need for conscious adaptation of urban design. Some children found being able to go to the mosque with grandparents or other relatives to be pleasant and companionable, moving through an environment imbued with a sense of faith tradition and history.

Child-Friendly Neighborhoods

Children were asked whether they considered their neighborhood to be child friendly or not. Out of 30 participants, six children believed that their neighborhood was not suitable for children, but 24 considered their neighborhood to be child friendly. Those who thought their neighborhood was unfriendly mentioned religion, size, safety and ordinariness, as illustrated by the following quotations: "our neighborhood is a "religious place," "our neighborhood is poky," "our neighborhood had nothing special," and "it is not safe outside at night." While many children liked their neighborhood's religious spaces such as mosques and their surrounds, a few of the children referred to religious characteristics of neighborhoods as a less-friendly feature. For these children, if observant practices had the effect of restricting available space and opportunities for playing activities, they perceived this as reducing the livability of their neighborhood.

Most of children had a sense of belonging to their neighborhoods. The statements below show that both boys and girls agreed on aspects that make a child-friendly neighborhood:

> *It is child-friendly because it is near to shops and parks* (12-year-old girl).
> *It is friendly for children because of its park* (12-year-old boy).
> *It is good for children since it has some places for playing* (10-year-old boy).
> *It is a good place because I can play with my friends there and visit my relatives* (11-year-old girl).
> *It is appropriate for children because it is near the Holy Shrine* (10-year-old boy).
> *It is suitable for children because it has policemen* (11-year-old boy).

Children did not mention many unfavorable areas in their neighborhood. Many of them answered that everything is pleasant. However, the most frequently mentioned answers about undesirable features of their neighborhoods included old buildings in some neighborhoods, the presence of some shops and how some shops were operated, the attributes of some local parks, lack of safety in some neighborhoods, and the general character of the neighborhood in some instances. Typical responses were:

> *Some local shops are expensive, and their products are not up to standard. There is no date of expiration on some goods* (12-year-old boy).
> *I do not like the park of neighborhood since a robbery took place* (10-year-old girl).
> *Some shops are crowded and men and women are close to each other* (11-year-old boy).

Again, intrusion of high-priced shops are perceived as extractive rather than part of locally based shopping. Community safety, too, is highlighted above even the desirability of room and space for enjoyable activities. Further, while a child in the United States would not even think to refer to men and women being in close proximity, in Iran, the juxtaposition of men and women is commonly understood in religious and gender hierarchy terms. In the preceding quote from an Iranian child, it is clear that crowded neighborhood spaces are perceived as undesirable not simply due to physical discomfort, but because of the breach of religious-political gender expectations. Each of these is part of the difficulty building local resilience without attention to these urban children's needs.

Discussion

This research aimed to discover what children in Mashhad City, Iran, thought about their neighborhoods, and the elements that they considered to be child-friendly. This article has presented children's interview responses to demonstrate that children's points of view are valuable and that they can be active partners in planning. The findings indicate that children like many aspects of their neighborhoods, such as the natural aspects of parks and aesthetically pleasing buildings that reflect tradition, religious values and architectural design. They think greater attention needs to be focused on improving the quality of some of their neighborhoods' features such as access to green spaces and cleanliness.

While many aspects of these Iranian children's views including safety, quality of the environment, and access to play and green spaces were similar to the ideas of children in other contexts such as Australia (Horsley neighborhood in the town of Dapto; Malone, 2011), Finland (the neighborhood of Pihlajamäki in Helsinki; Haikkola et al., 2007), and Sweden (three neighborhoods in Stockholm and the town of Gällivare; Nordström, 2010), there were also differences due to context-specific matters. The present research suggests that aspects of the UNCRC and the CFC framework can and are being effectively applied in Iran, but indicators assessing the child-friendliness of neighborhoods should continue to be developed locally. Cities and countries have unique social, economic and cultural backgrounds. Historically in Iran, children have been, and continue to be, ignored during decision-making processes, although there are some signs that this is changing. Traditional patriarchal systems in Iran did not let children express their opinions freely either in the family nor in society, and this is still a problem today. In the present study, for example, differences between girls' and boys' ability to play freely outdoors were indicated by the lack of girls' voices about playing in the street and their expressed desire for a girls' sports field.

In theocratic societies, children are strongly aware of and engaged with religion and the influence of associated cultural norms, but this is not strongly represented in contemporary research nor the development of CFC indicators. Religious spaces can have an important role in shaping children's ideas about their neighborhoods. In the present study, some children talked about mosques in their neighborhoods, which is not surprising, as the majority of neighborhoods in Iran have a mosque and a primary school as the neighborhood center. Visiting the local mosque with

grandparents and moving within the wide spaces offered there provides positive feelings for many in this 10-12-year old cohort of schoolchildren.

The use of conversational, semi-structured style interviews as a research tool allowed children's ideas about their neighborhoods to be elicited gradually and dialogically. It gave the children the chance to convey their thoughts and feelings in words in more open and independent ways. What participants said about their neighborhoods' features demonstrates that children living in the context of this research reflected similar preferences to what children have expressed in other contexts, including children's desires to access green spaces and play with friends in a hygienic and safe neighborhood.

Conclusion

This research has reported the views of children living in the city of Mashhad in Iran about their neighborhoods and what would make their local settings ideal. Participants had valuable perspectives and suggestions for making their neighborhoods better, showing a high level of competency and demonstrating that they are capable of working with professionals to design urban strategies.

Facilitating more interaction between planners and local children can provide the missing link for better planning in Iran. This can include considering children's engagement in neighborhood planning, integrating children's insights into local programs' outcomes, institutionalizing the concepts and methods of participation in educational environments through programs such as student councils, and establishing institutions such as child and youth councils in local governments.

Fortunately, there are existing educational structures that facilitate children's participation in civic activities, and children in this study were eager to contribute to research and planning processes. Their comments indicated that many of their human rights are being partially addressed within their neighborhoods, such as access to parks, space enabling outdoor play, places to socialize, and experiencing a sense of safety. Children also raised important issues with regard to the quality of parks and services as well as public cleanliness and disposal of rubbish.

The information that the children provided was informative and relevant to decision-makers and planners. This sort of information can readily be incorporated into city-wide children's strategies and state-of-the-city's-children report updates. Thematic and local issues and topics need not undercut other planning assessments or proposals, but rather add value. Significantly, children's contributions can provide professionals with salient information for spatial and social planning. This enables planners to advocate on the behalf of children, and to help children influence the development of child-friendly spaces and places.

The challenges for children and professional planners in Iran are layered, building upon the theocratic patriarchal system of governance, the planning system itself, and the willingness of planners to work with children as partners in planning activities for better urban environments.

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